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ABSTRACT

This chapter is part of a book that recounts the year's work at the Early Childhood Development Center (ECDC) at Texas A & M University-Corpus Christi. Rather than an "elitist" laboratory school for the children of university faculty, the dual-language ECDC is a collaboration between the Corpus Christi Independent School District and the university, with an enrollment representative of Corpus Christi's population. The chapter describes and evaluates an ECDC pedagogy renewal project on phonics instruction, involving interactions between graduate students, university faculty, and children entering first and second grades. The project entailed three components: (1) a subject area focus, which provided an in-depth examination of phonics; (2) a professional growth component, which promoted the habit of teacher reflection on literacy teaching and learning, and awareness of the many perspectives directly and indirectly affecting public school teaching and learning; and (3) an organizational component, which developed positive learning environments without the normal constraints of public school rules and regulations, and created collaborative learning experiences for students of all levels. Program evaluation showed positive results for adult learners, although effects on children's phonics learning were inconclusive. (Contains 20 references.) (EV)

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Chapter 7

# Assessment and Instruction of Phonics for Young Children: A Model for Collaborative Teaching and Learning

Merry Boggs

PS 030598

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Summer months offer release time for the exploration of innovative approaches to teaching. Educators at the Early Childhood Education Development Center (ECDC), the laboratory school at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi (TAMUCC), used two summer sessions to develop a multilevel pedagogy renewal project that included interactions between graduate students, university faculty, and young children. The project focused on one literacy component – phonics.

The project involved three components: subject area focus, professional growth, and an organization model. The activities related to the project provided opportunities for teachers to refine their perspectives on phonics instruction.

Participating teachers started the project with an in-depth examination of phonics. At the end of the course, the teachers were in a better position to understand, describe and apply their understanding of effective phonics instruction in their classrooms.

The professional component concentrated on (a) promoting the habit of teacher reflections on important issues of literacy teaching and learning and (b) developing awareness of many perspectives that directly and indirectly affect public school teaching and learning.

The goal of the organizational component was to (a) develop positive learning environments without the normal constraints of public school rules and regulations and (b) create collaborative learning experiences that included all levels of students. This article describes the ECDC summer project, discusses each component, and shares the results of the project.

## Components of the ECDC Pedagogy Renewal Project

### *Subject Area*

Phonics was selected as the subject focus of the project through a collaborative process between Corpus Christi Independent School District (CCISD) curriculum supervisors and TAMUCC faculty. Phonics instruction is a topic that invites conflicting viewpoints (Dahl, Scharer, Lawson, & Grogan, 2001; Routman, 1996; Stahl, Duffy-Hester, & Dougherty-Stahl, 1998). However, teachers need to understand these controversial issues so they can articulate research-

based responses to the issues and translate research into effective curriculum and instructional practices for their students.

A TAMUCC faculty member and ECDC teachers worked cooperatively to develop two graduate courses: "Teaching Phonics to Young Children" and "Practicum Course: Teaching Phonics to Young Children." During the four preplanning meetings that took place in April and May 2001, the group decided to:

1. Examine phonics from multiple perspectives (whole language, systemic instruction of phonics, and child development research).
2. Translate phonics research into daily practice.
3. Find phonics assessment instruments appropriate for different aged children.
4. Explore the idea of developmentally appropriate phonics.

The common thread throughout these phonics courses was "How can we apply what we learned to our own teaching practice?" Final plans for the phonics courses were made during the first class session with all participants present.

### *Professional Component*

There are many misconceptions about phonics. The major misunderstanding results from the reduction of reading instruction to a "phonics versus whole language" dichotomy. The whole language position promotes integrated phonics instruction within the literature program. Routman (1996) stated, "It would be irresponsible not to teach phonics" (p. 9). Stahl and Duffy-Hester (2001) claimed phonics misconceptions stem from the way people talk about reading, writing, and literacy. However, research has indicated that considerable time should be spent teaching explicit and comprehensive phonics skills to beginning readers (Beck & Juel, 1995; Grossen, 1997; Grossen & Carnine, 1990; Share & Stanovich, 1995; Williams, 1991). The goal of the TAMUCC phonics course was to have teachers study and interpret the research for themselves.

The two phonics courses were divided into three phases: (a) researching and studying phonics, (b) conducting individual investigations into phonics topics, and (c) applying new learning in the practicum course. The initial phase of the first course focused on

theory and research. In the next phase, graduate students studied an individual area of interest related to phonics, such as developmentally appropriate phonics, environmental print, spelling and phonics, writing and phonics, and phonics assessments. Finally, during the practicum course, graduate students applied their new understandings of phonics in an instructional program for ECDC students.

During the preplanning meetings, it became clear that the ECDC teachers have been intensively and singularly trained in direct phonics instruction with little time for thoughtful reflection. Additionally, their phonics training did not include a discussion of phonics integration within a balanced literacy program. Thus, the study of phonics focused on researching several competing positions. Through this in depth study, the teachers hoped to articulate their own position statements regarding phonics and the role of phonics in the process o reading and writing.

In the second phase of the phonics courses, teachers developed inquiry projects. The results of the projects were shared with cours colleagues. While TAMUCC faculty facilitated the inquiry phase graduate students created their own investigative paths. Several teachers worked together and others worked on their own.

During the third phase of the phonics course, the group develope curriculum for the practicum course based on the ages of the studen and the results of the graduate students' investigations. Teacher pre/post tested phonics mastery levels of ECDC students in th practicum. The results were then compared with the district pre/po results of the Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI). The TPRI given in August and September to all kindergarten, first and secor grade students in Texas public schools. Teachers in those grades a held accountable for their students' performance on the TPRI (Tex Education Agency, 2001).

The TPRI is a diagnostic test. A diagnostic test measures student's performance in a specific skill area. Assessment, on th other hand, may be used to measure a student's progress towar mastery of a skill or concept (Rhodes and Shanklin, 199 Assessment is often directly related to the teacher's instruction. In t practicum course, the group focused on a phonics assessment mod As reflective practitioners, they wanted quantitative and qualitati data to inform their emerging understanding of effective phoni instruction. Through assessing their students, the teachers collect data to support the hypotheses that developed during the first phase

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the project and were related to the way phonics works within a literacy program. Reflection and discussion alone do not drive effective instruction. They must be integrated with measures of student performance.

### *Organizational Component*

Both the graduate course and the practicum were organized to meet the learning needs of the participants. The graduate course took shape through collaborative preplanning meetings and culminated with the meeting of the course classes. An important goal was to design the course so that it met the needs of the adult learners and created a positive learning environment. After many hours of probing and encouraging discussions, the group agreed that they needed:

1. Time for research and study
2. Time for reflections, both written and oral
3. Faculty directed activities.

## Pedagogy and Curriculum Results

Measurements used in this project provided both qualitative and quantitative data. The findings are reported under the three components of the project.

### *Subject Area Results*

The intensive study of phonics helped the group make sense of the controversial issues surrounding the topic. The major researchers studied included Adams (1990); Cunningham (2000); Groff, Lapp, and Flood (1998); Lyon (1998); Routman, (1996); and Stahl et. al. (1998). As the group read competing phonics perspectives, they discovered that researchers actually shared a common set of phonics beliefs:

1. Phonics should be taught.
2. Phonics is a necessary component of a literacy program.
3. Student's literacy needs should guide the approach to phonics instruction.

Additionally, the teachers began to see where these same researchers differed on phonics:

1. How, when, and where to teach phonics
2. Implicit versus explicit teaching of phonics
3. Teacher-led instruction versus student-driven instruction

The examination of competing phonics perspectives led to lively discussion among the course participants. They found themselves challenging previously incomplete ideas on phonics that they had heard in a variety of workshops and from many different administrators. Furthermore, participants began to develop their own positions on phonics and effective phonic instruction.

After spending time in discussion of theory, the group expanded their understanding of phonics through direct experiences with students' literacy learning. Teachers found that whereas some students need little phonics instruction, others needed explicit phonics instruction. Eventually, group members concluded that individual student literacy needs should drive one's approach to teaching phonics.

### *Professional Component Results*

The professional component consisted of the phonics and practicum courses. The phonics course focused on creating a learning climate for adult learners. The practicum course involved implementing learning from the first course in an instructional setting with elementary-aged students.

Ultimately, the TAMUCC faculty member had control of the staff development phase of this program. She wanted to create an effective learning environment for participants, so she enlisted support from ECDC teachers to create a positive adult learning environment. The collaborative effort identified three necessary components of a successful staff development project:

1. Teachers needed time for professional, reflective discourse.
2. Teachers made sense of phonics based on their current grade level assignments.

3. Teachers needed a positive emotional climate for learning.

In this section, each of these points will be further discussed. Time became a double-edged sword. The group relished its time for professional discourse but simultaneously found time fleeting. Thoughtful reading and discussion took hours each day, but the results were amazing.

> " I want to be a better literacy teacher...I love to hear the comments and discussion from other teachers after reading articles" (Teacher A, personal communication, July 2001).
>
> "What a great idea to learn from each other" (Teacher B, personal communication, July 2001).
>
> I enjoy having time to read an article in class then having an immediate discussion on the subject matter. This is learning and making connections" (Teacher C, personal communication, July 2001).
>
> "I love having time to listen to other teachers' ideas and comments" (Teacher D, personal communication, July 2001).

At the end of every meeting time, teachers wrote in reflective journals. This provided an opportunity for communication between the teacher and the faculty member. The journals helped the faculty member make decisions about where to proceed next. Clearly, through the reflective journals and conversations, it was noted that teachers related new learning to their classroom experience. Each teacher came to scholarly discourse through her classroom. Adult learners are not different from children. They demand a positive learning climate for a positive learning experience. Participants shared, through conversations or journals, how their learning needs were met through the positive social environment. Participants were encouraged to share and support each other.

The practicum course evolved from each participant's understanding of phonics and the relationship of phonics to overall literacy. As the group prepared for the practicum course, teachers

were free to develop curriculum based on their interest and knowledge:

- Phonemic awareness through music
- Phonics through good literature
- Phonics through developmental appropriate activities
- Phonics through writing

It was agreed to assess all of the students within the first two days of the practicum course. Post-testing was planned but later abandoned because two weeks was not enough time to re-assess students' phonics knowledge. Instead it was decided to gather each student's results from the Texas Primary Reading Inventory (TPRI) given within the first month of every school year.

The next section discusses students' results. Additionally, descriptive data was collected to demonstrate student success in the practicum course.

### *Organizational Component Results*

#### *Students entering First and Second Grade*

A group of four teachers worked with fourteen students entering first and second grade. The teachers team-taught everything discussing and sharing every day after the students left. These teachers completed a phonic awareness assessment of all first and second grade students. The phonic awareness assessment included the following sub-tests: rhyme task, oddity task, oral blending task, oral segmentation task, and phonemic manipulation task (Blevins, 1998). Only ten of the fourteen were assessed because some students did not attend assessment sections. The results of the assessment are shown in Table 1.

*Table 1*
*Student Assessment of Phonemic Awareness*

| | Rhyme | Oddity | Oral Blending | Oral Segmentation | Phonemic Manipulation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Students entering first grade | | | | | |
| Student A | 12/12 | 8/12 | 11/12 | 21/24 | 5/12 |
| Student B | 12/12 | 12/12 | 11/12 | 22/24 | 11/12 |
| Student C | 12/12 | 7/12 | 12/12 | 22/24 | 10/12 |
| Student D | 12/12 | 10/12 | 12/12 | 18/24 | 6/12 |
| Student E | 12/12 | 12/12 | 11/12 | 23/24 | 10/12 |
| Students entering second grade | | | | | |
| Student A | 11/12 | 9/12 | 12/12 | 24/24 | 6/12 |
| Student B | 12/12 | 12/12 | 12/12 | 24/24 | 12/12 |
| Student C | 10/12 | 11/12 | 12/12 | 24/24 | 12/12 |
| Student D | 12/12 | 12/12 | 12/12 | 24/24 | 9/12 |
| Student E | 11/12 | 11/12 | 11/12 | 21/24 | 12/12 |

Teachers working with these students used daily music to promote phonemic awareness abilities, daily writing, and daily word building activities. Results from the TPRI are show in Table 2.

*Table 2*
*TPRI results*

| Students | TPRI Reading Level |
|---|---|
| Students entering first grade | |
| Student A | Data NA |
| Student B | Data NA |
| Student C | Instructional at 1st |
| Student D | Independent at 1st |
| Student E | Frustration at 1st |
| **Students entering second grade** | |
| Student A | Data NA |
| Student B | Independent at 2nd |
| Student C | Instructional at 2nd |
| Student D | Frustrational at 2nd |
| Student E | Independent at 2nd |

***Students Entering Third Grade***

Two teachers worked with students going into third grade beginning with the 2001 school year. Each took a different approach to assessment and to providing student curriculum and instruction. One teacher, Mrs. A., conducted running records and/or miscue analysis (Routman, 2000) to determine students' phonics strengths and weaknesses. In a running record, the student reads aloud from a passage of approximately one hundred words. The teacher checks off each word of the text that the student reads correctly and also notes the specific errors and self-corrections that the reader makes (Routman, 2000). In this case, Mrs. A used *Gruffalo*, (Donaldson, 1999) for the running record. Student performance results are shown in Table 3.

*Table 3*
*Pre-Assessment: Running Record Results*

| Student | Second-grade Word Recognition Level Proficiency |
|---|---|
| Student A | 73% |
| Student B | 95% |
| Student C | 98% |
| Student D | 68% Discontinued frustrated |

Mrs. A, who favored a strong literature program, selected the book *Gruffalo* (Donaldson, 1999) for students to read during the project. Realizing that students were on different levels, she prepared students to read this text successfully through building vocabulary knowledge and prior experiences. For the next two weeks, Mrs. A spend time reading, discussing, working on vocabulary, listening to *Gruffalo* on tape, writing, completing word building activities, and reading stories that had similar topics as *Gruffalo*. At the end, Mrs. A assessed students through the independent reading of *Gruffalo* to determine their success with the story. Results of the post assessment are shown in Table 4.

*Table 4*
*Post Assessment: Running Record Results*

| Student | Word recognition of the Gruffalo |
|---|---|
| Student A | 90% (used expression) |
| Student B | 95% |
| Student C | 98% with great improvement on fluency |
| Student D | 82% Frustrated, but with improvement |

Mrs. B, the other third grade teacher, chose to give the Names Test (Cunningham, 1990; Duffelmeyer, Kruse, Merkley, & Fyfe,

1994) as a means to determine students' phonics knowledge. The results of the Names Test are shown in Table 5.

*Table 5*
*Names Test Results*

| Student | Names' Test Proficiency |
|---|---|
| Student A | 50% |
| Student B | 98% |
| Student C | 90% |
| Student D | 74% |
| Student E | 95% |

Based on these results, Mrs. B included "making big words" (Cunningham & Hall, 1994) as a component of her literacy instruction. Mrs. B organized her class as a travel group that visited different countries through children's' literature. Because the students were not re-tested at the end of the two-week period, there is no measurable data that shows student phonics knowledge improvement. However, the third grade teacher told the group that these students did well when they returned to school in the fall. Additionally, students enjoyed the "making big words" activity and looked forward to continuing with the activities.

## Conclusions

This summer phonics project was successful in implementing a positive learning climate for adults and providing a collaborative learning opportunity for graduate students and university faculty. However, these results are short-term gains. Further data collection would be required to assess long-term gains and carryover to the teachers' classrooms. The graduate and undergraduate students clearly felt that the course work and practicum were invaluable to their learning. Even though the student achievement results are inconclusive, reports from parents and students indicate a positive experience with literacy and phonics. In addition, the Texas TPRI

showed that students started the new school year reading independently or instructionally at grade level, with the exception of one student who was still at frustration level. It is not possible to generate conclusions from such a small sample. Clearly, the group made a difference with the majority of students who participated. This research project could be a pilot study that leads to further in-depth investigations. Effective staff development programs take two to three years to establish lasting results and successful implementation; therefore, it is planned to continue refining this model. For the next summer project, TAMUCC and ECDC teachers will address vocabulary in young children and continue to reach more ECDC students.

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